

# Growing Up Union and Feminist

## A PROFILE OF ALICE WEST

Alice West was 16 when she began working in a plywood plant along the Fraser River in south Vancouver. It was 1942 and jobs had been opening up for women since war broke out and men were leaving to fight overseas. "We weren't paid much compared to other jobs but we had our own money and freedom," West remembers. "I wasn't a schoolgirl anymore." She and a few of her co-workers got the notion to organize a union at the plant, and they succeeded. West has been fighting for equality and fair treatment ever since.

Still active at age 87, West was given the Rosemary Brown Award for Women on June 7 at a luncheon in Vancouver. The award is given annually in memory of the late B.C. politician and feminist, Rosemary Brown. Her daughter, Cleta Brown, presented the award to West for her lifetime contributions to women in the labour movement.

In an interview with *Our Times* magazine at her home in Burnaby a few weeks later, West recalled her many union battles, beginning with the plywood plant.



PHOTOGRAPH: JANET NICOL

**"W** E HAD TO USE MACHINERY SUCH AS CUT-OFF SAWS," WEST SAYS. "LOTS OF YOUNG women worked there. There was a company union and the employer had representatives at meetings, but if the reps raised a grievance, nothing was done. Safety was a great issue. But safety only came up when there was an accident and workers' compensation was involved. We wanted to do something."

"The business agent for the International Woodworkers of America (IWA), Burt, and a few of us at the plant, organized the workers — a mix of men and women — and our union was eventually recognized," West recalls. "We had to collect the union dues in those days, too." (The Rand Formula, whereby union dues are automatically deducted from paycheques and remitted to the union by the employer, had not yet been won.)

West's experience on her first job stayed with her for the rest of her life. "I still have friends from the plywood plant," she says. But, as West continues to reflect, she also considers her father's influence. "My father was strongly in favour of union organizing.

By Janet Nicol

He believed in strong unions. It was something I breathed in — my beliefs started quite early." West was born Alice Pack in Winnipeg, the eldest of three children. She was schooled during the Depression years as her family moved back and forth between the Prairie city and the Selkirk region of British Columbia. Eventually, they settled on Vancouver's East Side and West completed her last year of high school at Britannia Secondary, her two brothers following behind her.

"I grew up in the '30s," she says. "My father was a great believer in a good education. He was a carpenter and only had Grade 6 education. Still, he could solve math problems: algebra and trigonometry. He was self-taught." Her father believed boys needed more education than girls, she remembers. "I was smarter than both my brothers — they were more into sports. You were expected to do your best, but girls were expected to get married." West was also expected to help her mother, a gentle person who West recalls as someone who never raised her voice. West had a lot of her father in her. "I was able to get along with others," she says, "but I had my ideas too — like my dad."

When the war ended, women were pressured to leave their jobs to make way for the returning veterans. West downed her tools at the plywood plant and found work at a bank where she would stay for more than three years.

"I worked at the Royal Bank," she says. "It was very autocratic. The pay was low and we worked five days a week and half a day on Saturday. We often stayed evenings to balance the books, sometimes to 7 or 8 pm. It was an eye-opener. Anyone who mentioned a union would have been laughed out or considered someone to get rid of."

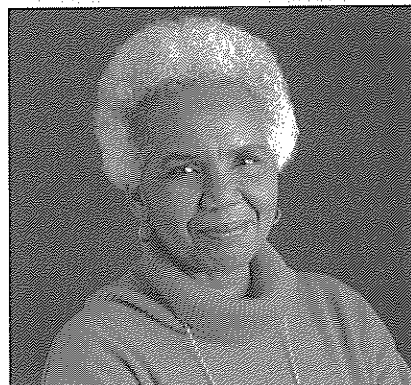
Despite her parents' emphasis on her brothers' education over hers, West began, but regretfully did not complete, a bachelor of arts degree by correspondence. She had dreamed of being a journalist. By 21, she was married and devoted the next several years at her east-side Vancouver home raising three daughters. When they were in school she took on a part-time job, but was also involved in the parent-teacher association, Brownies, Girl Guides, and Sunday school teaching.

"As my kids got older, I got work with the federal government," she says. "I wanted to have money to help my daughters do whatever they wanted to do. I wasn't going to let anything stand in their way."

It was 1966 and Canadian society was opening up to progressive social change. West began working at a Vancouver Unemployment Insurance Commission (UIC) office, a position she held for 22 years. She worked her way up from clerical duties to adjudicating unemployment insurance claims. Meanwhile, the federal government, under Liberal Prime Minister Lester Pearson, had passed the Public Service Act which "allowed" employees to belong to a union. Thus was born the Public Service Alliance of Canada

## ROSEMARY BROWN AWARD FOR WOMEN

Rosemary Brown (1930-2003) was a beloved pioneer of the best of 20th century Canadian politics, devoting her life to the cause of justice and equality for women and people of colour.



Rosemary Brown championed equality for women and people of colour, and justice for all.

She was, among other things, a social worker, an author, a media personality, an academic, and a feminist. An active member of the New Democratic Party, she was also a politician and was elected to the provincial legislature of British Columbia in 1972, becoming the first Black woman in Canadian history to be a member of a Canadian parliamentary body. Her autobiography, **Being Brown: A Very Public Life**, was published by Random House in 1989.

Each year, the Rosemary Brown Award for Women recognizes a B.C. woman (or B.C.-based organization) who promotes the values and ideals that Rosemary Brown championed during her lifetime. The areas of women's activism the award honours include: children's rights, women in the labour movement, women's equality issues, human rights, political activism or women in politics, social justice and community development, and international development. This year union and retiree activist Alice West won the award, under the category "Women in the Labour Movement."

West did not know Brown personally, but she was a great admirer of her activism and considered her a mentor. "Rosemary Brown said, 'Until we all make it, nobody makes it.' This quote tells the story of life itself."

**B.C. Human Rights Coalition/Janet Nicol/www.heroines.ca**

## I wanted to have money to help my daughters do whatever they wanted

(PSAC) or "the Alliance," as West calls it.

West was elected as a shop steward, then local president, and, in 1979, national director for the B.C. Yukon and Northwest Territories. "I loved the North," she says. "It's fascinating country. In the territories, government jobs are very worthwhile for First

Nations people. There is such poverty. The poverty of children is such a waste of people."

Union leadership was still in the hands of men, as West found out. There was only one other woman in a union leadership role. The rest, she says "were 'suits,' as I call them — no different from corporate men. I had known real union people, like my father." At first, her union, she says, "didn't feel like a union. I wanted to represent the employees. It was an eye-opener." But change was coming and West was riding the wave.

"A few more women eventually got elected to the board," she says. "We held separate meetings to plan out ideas we felt were important. It took awhile to get the 'suits' to listen to us. We told them not all employees were happy with the way they were running the union. Women began speaking up elsewhere, too," she adds. "Many people were shocked, they were not used to it."

The era saw the emergence of "superwomen," as more women combined domestic and paid work duties. "My work day was a triple-day load," West reflects, "as my three girls were still in school, my husband worked shifts, and I worked a full day for the government and also kept my union work as up to date as possible."

Throughout West's most active years, her (now deceased) husband was at her side. Her husband had grown up during the Depression, as well. The eldest of four, he supported his mother, who was widowed at 39 and determined to continue raising her children, despite the challenges. West had found an empathetic life partner.

"My husband was very supportive and positive," she says. "I couldn't do what I've done without him. He knew I had to do these things. 'Why do we waste half the world? Women are smarter!' he'd say."

Another feminist battle West's union took on was recognition of equal pay for work of equal value. Traditionally, women's skills and work categories are devalued, while men performing at the same skill level are awarded higher pay. "It took 25 years to settle this, long after I retired," West says. "There was court case after court case and it cost millions of dollars. The money spent could have been paid to the women affected."

As part of the negotiating team, West took on another major contract issue: paid maternity leave. "My father had said, 'You are a fool, it will never happen,'" recalls West. He died shortly after, before the union won paid maternity leave. "If he'd seen the gain, he'd see it took persistence. We didn't let it go." West says as long as women are in the workforce, there has to be paid maternity leave. It's a benefit that gives stability and security to both employer and employee.

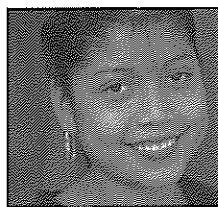
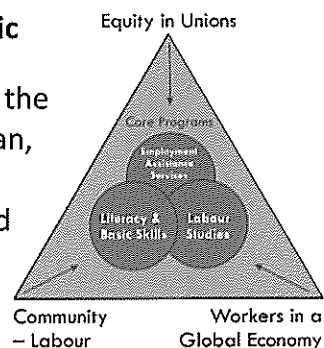
"When paid maternity leave was negotiated into our contract for the first time, the women on the negotiating team were thrilled," West says. But they hadn't realized that all of their membership didn't share their feelings.

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"We got nasty phone calls from men," West remembers. Some women weren't happy, either. "Women told us they were too old to use maternity leave and wouldn't benefit. The anger was visceral. Those calls — I didn't like it." Despite making feminist history, West says it turned into a bittersweet victory. "I realized we hadn't done a good enough job explaining this benefit to our members."

Other challenges and experiences in the 1980s were still to come for West, including the first national PSAC women's conference, held in Montreal. West was a key organizer and co-chaired the event, attended by more than 500 women. "We talked about sexual and psychological harassment," she recalls. "Some women guests from other countries had to use a different name when they spoke or there would be a backlash when they got home. We learned how much we needed to co-operate with other women from around the world."

In 1988, with Prime Minister Mulroney's Conservative government in power, West retired from civil service, but that didn't stop her activism. She became involved in an organization unique to Canada, the BC Federation of Retired Union Members (BC FORUM), where she once served as president and remains a member of the board of directors. Started in the early 1990s by Bill Clark (1932-2010), former president of the Telecommunications Workers Union (TWU), and affiliated with the BC Federation of Labour, the group is comprised of retired trade union activists, actively involved in public policy debates on issues affecting seniors.

As West speaks of her work, she goes back to the idea of combating "wasted potential."

"All these knowledgeable trade unionists who are retired are now the senior activists in the federation. We have organized protests in Victoria on health issues and organized petitions and briefs on issues affecting seniors." West herself has also been active in the Seniors Society at 411 Dunsmuir, a Vancouver seniors centre, and helped organize their Seniors' Summit in 1999, a three-day event. "Poverty among seniors was an issue," she said "and we continued to meet after the summit. Women Elders in Action was formed."

The group obtained a Status of Women grant and created a booklet on women and pensions. "The majority of seniors are women; many are dependent on what the husband left. Pension contracts are not very good to survivors," she says. In 2007, West appeared before Parliament's Standing Committee on the Status of Women to call attention to poverty among older women. But the battle for fair pensions continues. "The Harper government has unleashed a new attack on Canada's already inadequate public pension system," West says, "while the provincial government continues to fail to meet the needs of retired workers."

Another recent project had West and others travelling all over B.C. to record women elders' life stories.



PHOTOGRAPH: SVETLANA KHAKHLEVA

This year Alice West (centre) was honoured with the Rosemary Brown Award for Women. Left to right: BC Federation of Retired Union Members (BC Forum) executive board member, Miriam Olney; Alice West; Diane Wood, president of the BC Forum.

The book, published in 2009, is called *Mytibogyny*. Part of a story-gathering project called "Lessons Learned: The Lives and Times of Women Elders in B.C.," its oral stories aim to honour women's lives.

West continues to observe public- and private-sector trends with an astute eye. "The present government is looking at ways to save money," she says of Harper's government. "They are looking at a merit pay system. This has been tried but hasn't worked. It ends up being favouritism."

"Wages haven't moved in the last decade," West also notices. "Everyone deserves a secure life, a decent life, with families. There is lots of corporate greed."

"It used to be when a new government came in, employees were fired," she says. "The new government brought in their friends. That doesn't happen because of unionization. I'm also concerned they may do away with the Rand Formula. We can lose all these rights very quickly. I worry," she says, "that young women don't seem to recognize this could happen."

West says of her own motivation to persist: "My focus has always been my family and how I could try to make life better for us. My union and community work has been an extension of this view." She concludes: "I believe women should be considered as equals. That's all I wanted: respect and recognition for who I am."

Janet Nicol is a Vancouver-based freelance writer, high school teacher, and member of the B.C. Teachers' Federation (BCTF).

For more information about the BC Federation of Retired Union members (BC FORUM), visit [www.bcforum.ca](http://www.bcforum.ca). For more information about the PSAC, visit [www.psac.com](http://www.psac.com).